

## Disappearing Acts: On Analysing Creative Practice in Spain

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### Abstract

This paper deals with modes of seeing and ways of working in contemporary Spanish theatre. It explores the methodologies of talking with actors about the preparation and enactment of a role, of observing rehearsals and discussing the setting up of the sequence of actions that makes up the theatrical performance, and how these interactive collaborations with theatre and film artists can assist in a mapping out of ‘other’ or largely undocumented working practices. Indeed, furthering the dissemination of these methodologies — through published interviews, editorial work, and the programming of film seasons, and other public engagement events, and production reviews, — has allowed it to be tested, assessed, and modified elsewhere. It draws on a few select examples — conversations with Nuria Espert on her own practice over the past 60 years; observational work watching the production process of stage directors Calixto Bieito and Lluís Pasqual as each constructs a stage world with their creative and technical team during the rehearsal process; and in the final section of the paper, an extended consideration of my collaborations with Pedro Almodóvar for BAFTA, the British Film Institute and Ambassadors Theatre Group. My discussion is framed around broader methodological questions I have drawn on in archival research conducted on the actresses María Guerrero and Margarita Xirgu. Through this framing mechanism, I hope to show how an engagement with practices of enactment has shaped the

historical narratives I have constructed on creative practice in Spain through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, and the ways in which a direct engagement with those who make culture in Spain can assist in understanding how that culture is constructed and consumed.

**KEYWORDS:** methodology; interviews; theatre; cinema; creative practice

## **Resumen**

Este artículo trata de maneras de ver y maneras de trabajar en el teatro español contemporáneo. Examina las metodologías asociadas con hablar con actores acerca de los preparativos para — y la representación de — un papel, con asistir a ensayos y reflexionar sobre la ordenación de las acciones que componen la representación teatral, y con las maneras en que las colaboraciones interactivas con artistas del cine y del teatro pueden ayudar a trazar prácticas laborales alternativas o poco documentadas. De hecho, extender la diseminación de estas metodologías — a través de la publicación de entrevistas, el trabajo editorial, y la programación de festivales de cine, así como otros eventos de cara al público y reseñas — nos ha permitido ensayarlas, evaluarlas y modificarlas en otros foros. Citamos algunos ejemplos destacados — conversaciones con Nuria Espert sobre sus propios métodos a lo largo de los últimos 60 años; nuestras observaciones al seguir los procedimientos de los directores Calixto Bieito y Lluís Pascual al montar una producción, al construir un mundo escenificado con sus propios equipos creativos y técnicos durante los ensayos; y, en la última sección del artículo, una reflexión extensa acerca de nuestras colaboraciones con Pedro Almodóvar para BAFTA, el British Film Institute y el Ambassadors Theatre Group. Nuestras observaciones se enmarcan dentro de

cuestiones metodológicas más amplias que hemos tratado en investigaciones realizadas sobre las actrices María Guerrero y Margarita Xirgu. A través de este mecanismo de enmarcar, nos proponemos demostrar cómo el tratamiento con prácticas de representación ha influido en las narrativas históricas que hemos construido sobre la práctica creativa en España a lo largo del siglo XX y durante el siglo XXI, y las maneras en que una interacción directa con los que crean la cultura en España puede ayudar a comprender cómo se construye y consume esa misma cultura.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** metodología; entrevistas; teatro; cine; práctica creativa

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Not long after completing my doctorate, I was asked what area of Hispanism I worked on. ‘Creative practice’ I replied. ‘Does that mean plays?’ came the follow up question. ‘Not really’, came my response. ‘So, what is it about?’ came the retort. It’s an issue I’ve been grappling with for close to thirty years. There is an element of analysis, in which I observe and critique the work of contemporary practitioners, often considering it in relation to broader cultural, social, and political concerns. This approach is a development from the traditional text-based focus of play analysis, but expanded to consider the whole performance text (settings, lighting, sound, music, choreography, videography, performers’ physicality and vocal work, as well as the situational context of performance and audience factor) into my ‘reading’. But it is also about process as

much as product, about the group activity of making work, devising or shaping material, workshops, the building of actions or sequences, the development of the *mise en scène*, the discoveries that come in the rehearsal room or on set, the craftsmanship that is too often erased in the need to organize the branding of creative work under the authorial trademark: the imperative to stress the recognizable style and/or thematics promoted by a dramatist or filmmaker across a body of work.

This article focuses on modes of seeing and ways of working, about what I have learned from the methodologies of talking with actors about the preparation and enactment of a role, of observing rehearsals and discussing the setting up of the sequence of actions that makes up the theatrical performance or film sequence, and how these interactive collaborations with theatre and film artists have assisted in a mapping out of ‘other’ or largely undocumented working practices. I am going to draw on a few select examples: conversations with Nuria Espert on her own practice over the past 60 years; observational work watching the production process of stage directors Calixto Bieito and Lluís Pasqual as each constructs a stage world with their creative and technical team during the rehearsal process; and in the second half of the paper, an extended consideration of my collaborations with Pedro Almodóvar for BAFTA, the British Film Institute and Ambassadors Theatre Group. My discussion is framed around broader methodological questions I have drawn on in archival research conducted on the actresses María Guerrero and Margarita Xirgu. Through this framing mechanism, I hope to show how an engagement with practices of enactment has shaped the historical narratives I have constructed on creative practice in Spain through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, and the ways in which a

direct engagement with those who make culture in Spain can assist in understanding how that culture is constructed and consumed.

### **Theatre and documentation**

It is possible for many of us working in Hispanism to identify a text, a film, a painting, a poem, a novel, a play, a biography that played a key role in luring us into the discipline. It may have seduced or beguiled us, left us dizzy with excitement or obsessed to the point that we had to return to try and make sense of it. For me that moment was a performance seen at Madrid's Centro Dramático Nacional in late 1983: *La vida del rey Eduardo II de Inglaterra*, a production by Lluís Pasqual of a play by Christopher Marlowe adapted by Bertolt Brecht, translated by Jaime Gil de Biedma and Carlos Barral, with Alfredo Alcón as the infatuated monarch and Antonio Banderas as his Court darling Piers Gaveston. Evolving on a circular sand-covered set, the pacing was urgent, the homoerotic desire palpable. Edward's unruly craving spilled out verbally and physically whenever the two were alone with fumbled embraces and dangerous kisses. Public displays were somewhat more controlled but the sexual tension was tangible: the stable-boy Gaveston at the besotted King's feet like a loyal Labrador with the Queen looking on to see herself displaced as consort, and José Luis Pellicena's cool, rational Mortimer forming a pragmatic alliance with the Queen to bring down the errant monarch. There is much about the production that I no longer remember but the sheer excitement generated by the patterns of desire — the locked glances, the furtive clinches, the desperate kisses — and the economic design giving space to the actor as storyteller, felt exhilarating. I was hooked.

I have written elsewhere of how the ephemeral nature of the theatrical event necessarily renders documentation an elusive proposition, perhaps going some way towards explaining the

construction of a theatrical hierarchy that places the playwright at its pinnacle (Delgado 2003, 1–5; Delgado and Gies 2012, 206). It is the work of playwrights that dominates the ways in which theatre is taught in many university courses. The richness of the Golden Age embodied in Lope de Vega, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, and Tirso de Molina; the eighteenth century too often seen through a few select playtexts: most conspicuously Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos's *El delincuente honrado*, Ramón de la Cruz's *Manolo* or *El teatro por dentro* (Delgado and Gies 2012, 3). Similarly, the nineteenth-century theatre is too often not presented 'as a vibrant industry where ideas of authorship were consolidated and the commercial interests of a select group of publishers' impacted decisively on the shape of the theatrical repertoire, but rather viewed through select literary works: the Duque de Rivas's *Don Alvaro o la fuerza del sino*, José Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio*, Manuel Tamayo y Baus's *Un drama nuevo*, a play or two on social malaise and gender inequalities by novelist-turned dramatist Benito Pérez Galdós, and a representative text by the Nobel-Prizewinning observer of middle-class manners and excesses, José Echegaray (Delgado and Gies 2012, 3; see also Gies 1994, 1). The legacy of such an approach is evidenced in G. G. Brown's *Literary History of Spain* which conflates theatre and drama in his assertion that twentieth-century drama is 'unquestionably the branch of the arts in which Spain has least to offer to the common store of European culture' (1972, 110).

As David Gies and I have noted elsewhere, Brown is indicative of a range of scholars for whom the most tangible remains of the most ephemeral of art forms stand as its primary signifier (Delgado 2003, 5; Delgado and Gies 2012, 3–4). The play text functions as the privileged object of scrutiny. Theatre of the post-Civil War era is Antonio Buero Vallejo and Alfonso Sastre, Alfonso Paso and Miguel Mihura, Jardiel Poncela and Víctor Ruiz Iriarte. Plays can be contained in script form; performances spill out into the public sphere and can less easily be monitored or

controlled. Watching the actors on that winter night in Madrid, I realized that it was the physical and material (as opposed to simply the literary) resources of the stage that I was really interested in: the stage bodies colliding and collapsing that stood in contrast to the prerequisites that art be, to quote the feminist historian Jacky Bratton, ‘the unique product of the autonomous artist, the individual “genius” at work alone, challenging and expanding the horizons of human experience’ (2000, 8–9). When individual authorship is prioritized, the concerted creative work that underpins theatre-making is often demeaned, with craft and labour habitually occupying a secondary position to the celebration of the literati and the connotations of genius that too often problematically accompany it. Theatre offers a model of community and collaboration. This is evident both in the process of bringing actors, directors, designers, seamstresses, set builders, stage-managers etc. together in the making of the work and through the duration of the action as the audience and actors come together to inhabit the shared space of performance. What I realized that night of *El Rey Eduardo II de Inglaterra* is that that performance is a one-off that finds its most persuasive definition in an eternal present tense. But even if each performance is an act towards disappearance, writing might function as a step towards some degree of preservation. Documenting the process and practices, the making and the seeing of stage practice is a process of inscribing, of making visible that which has disappeared, both from the lived space of performance and from published histories such as that of G. G. Brown or Francisco Ruiz Ramón (1984). If I didn’t feel that the histories I was reading offered a narrative of the theatre I was seeing, it was time to write an alternative history.

## **Writing histories**

... absence from the histories is not an indication of an absence from history

(Gale and Gardner 2000, 5).

Theatre history is a discipline that gravitates around loss and incompleteness, fragility and absence. The performance itself is often absent from the ‘sources’ that historians draw on in crafting historical narratives. Joseph Roach has written extensively on the problems of the term ‘source’ ‘with its ‘false promise of authentic origin’; ‘no document can survive intact’ and a Western preoccupation with ‘trying to write everything down — ethnography, biography, historiography, and the rest’ he claims, cannot ever put the performance back together again (1992, 293). But while loss is central to the theatrical condition, performance, as Jodi Kanter notes, ‘invites us to do something with loss, and in the very means of doing, find some compensation’ (2007, 20). The writing stages the ‘unheard voices and unseen bodies’ (Kantor 2007, 16), what Joseph Roach writes of as surrogates ‘inserted into the cavities created by loss’ (1996, 2). I cannot replace the thrill of the live but the alternative I offer can both acknowledge and conserve that loss.

I am very aware of the particular ideological, political, and gendered position I occupy and the ways in which this has shaped my own agenda and priorities as a scholar. I write about actresses because the thrill of seeing the woman performer in a role of agency on a stage just won’t go away. María Casares’s raspish laughter, precise corporeal expression, and uncanny animal noises as the wily Mother in Genet’s *Les paravents* in 1983; Nuria Espert’s erotic Arkadina in the *La gaviota* in 1997, powdering her face to restore its composure as she completes the operation of silencing Josep Maria Flotat’s Trigorin through seductive flattery, or her haughty indifference and pointed retorts, an image of bitter apathy and vicious social snobbery as Martha in *¿Quién teme a Virginia Woolf?* in 1999. The female body centre stage — arguing,



defying, and initiating: with corporeal language deployed to articulate a complexity of character that might not be manifest through facial expressions or verbal enunciation. On the stage I saw artistry and action but publications on actresses that I consulted positioned these women predominantly as inspirations to male agency.<sup>1</sup> Margarita Xirgu was the muse to Federico García Lorca, María Guerrero the virtuoso performer of Benavente and Echegaray's stage works. Yet correspondence, reviews, posters, and interviews demonstrated the ways in which these three writers were nurtured and promoted by the powerful actress-managers whose companies dominated the Spanish stage in the 50 years leading up to the outbreak of the Civil War. Too often, however, Xirgu and Guerrero's collaborative contribution to stage histories is reduced to virtuoso performances that erase their advocacy and agency in the financial and artistic processes that govern theatre-making. Neither left written accounts of their work — unlike their male contemporaries and successors, such as Enric Borràs and Paco Rabal, who 'published their life stories' as a mode of delineating 'their own autonomy and their unique importance to the public life of their day' (Bratton 2003, 101–102). Biographies of Guerrero and Xirgu move between an overreliance on what Marvin Carlson sees as the 'artifactual record' (2003, 2), the accumulation of supposedly 'reliable' evidence, and descriptive discourses that position them as decorative stage artifacts. Such approaches frequently mask both the invisibility of practitioners' views and the degree of informed speculation that is part of all scholarship on performance.

Ismael Sánchez Estevan's 1946 biography of Guerrero only provides a brief five-page section on 'el arte de María Guerrero' (220–225): a series of quotes stitched together from those who saw her in performance. It is the sole moment where there is any discussion of what distinguished her stage performances: her low register and ability to convey subtle transitions of

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<sup>1</sup> This section draws on research published elsewhere, see Delgado (2007).

mood; her talent for mimicry and voice modulations; her careful diction and short energetic breaths; her attention to diet and training; a style of delivery defined by a somewhat threatening solemnity and cold fast laughter.

Equally with Antonina Rodrigo's 1974 biography of Xirgu, there is nominal information on the actress's professionalism, her disposal of the prompt box on stage, and her sculpting of performances using referents from paintings. With Guerrero and Xirgu, I cannot watch the performances, but I can examine studio portraits, interviews, costumes, and in the latter's case recordings. By these means I have been able to locate information on Xirgu's promotion of methodical rehearsals, her restraint, detailed preparation, and unwillingness to improvise; her musical intonation and diction, and less codified performance style; the malleability of her facial features, a marked pronunciation of syllables and her slight frame transformed through costume in studio photographs to suggest a more authoritative and imposing stage persona. I can intervene in the process of writing about their practice — as in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting* — where I have consciously redressed the balance that too often positions these performers as secondary figures to their European counterparts Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, and Adelaide Ristori.<sup>2</sup> There are of course political reasons for this which I have written of elsewhere (Delgado 2003, 21–66): Xirgu never toured outside the Spanish-speaking world and her exile in Chile and Uruguay, away from the dominant theatrical infrastructure of Western Europe and North America, served to position her as a 'local' rather than a 'global' figure — global in theatrical terms problematically equated with English-language and/or Western Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> See Williams (2015b) for entries on these Spanish actresses and others (100–102, 182–183, 193–194, 235, 325, 328, 344, 347, 352, 441, 445, 458, 484, 492, 508, 521).

Actors are central figures in stage performance but the moment that a performance ends, they are relegated to the terrain of memory. The theatre historian Marvin Carlson refers to theatre as ‘the repository of cultural memory, but like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts’ (2003, 2). When examining the work of contemporary actresses, I may have access to the live event but I repeatedly question what I remember and why? How did the responses of the other audience members shape my reception of the performance? How did the factors shaping my journey to the place of performance, my seat and my view of the stage area affect how I read the production? Did I see an understudy? Was it the first or second performance of the day? How full was the venue? How does the production relate to previous productions of the play, previous works by the company or director, previous stagings in this venue? How does my memory inform the process of theatrical reception? Stage performances are now made available via DVD and high definition transmissions, but these have been recorded on a particular day at a particular time in front of a particular audience that often never features in the recording. There’s been a specific framing of the performance, decisions made by the person recording on perspective that lead the viewer’s eye and ear in a precise direction. This necessarily shapes how we read the event. In addition, as Simon Williams observes, ‘the sharp edge of the acting can be blunted, the physical and tactile immediacy of the actor’s presence reduced and the physical space that actors use to fill and enlarge their performances nullified by the two dimensions imposed on us by the screen’ (2015a, xi). A recorded performance is a useful tool but one can never pretend that it is a live event.

The process of interviewing stage and screen performers and directors over the past fifteen years has been part of a methodology of consciously inscribing their contributions to the

labour of making theatre. At first it was a way of testing findings, cross-referencing their records of past productions, institutional structures and working processes with the archival research conducted. But soon it evolved into a process of documentation, of generating primary materials that would allow for a discussion of process as well as product, or what Elin Diamond refers to as ‘the doing and the thing done’ (1996, 1). It makes visible the often invisible craft of producing work, the creative relationships, decisions and debates that are habitually reserved to the rehearsal room. It also offers perspectives on wider historiographical issues related to the construction of theatre histories and the ways in which practitioners are deprived of agency in the process of constructing wider evaluations of practice.

In 2009 David Gies and I were approached by Cambridge University Press about editing a history of the theatre in Spain. Looking at previous histories, such as that of Javier Huerta published by Gredos in 2003 or José María Díez Borque by Taurus between 1984 and 1988, both of us were struck by the absence of practitioners from the process of ‘writing’ about theatre-making. Perhaps this is to do with assumptions that somehow, what Jacky Bratton terms ‘non-documentary evidence’, has no place in theatre history (2003, 99), that actors exist as objects to be interpreted by others, or that the discourse of performance blurs on- and off-stage identities, what Thomas Postlewait signals as ‘a masquerade moving from stage to page’ (1989, 259). The all too familiar associations with immorality and impropriety — the familiar actress/whore trope — continue to haunt the reception of women performers with worth defined primarily through the body. The view of actors as tradesmen, the hostility to a culture of self-determination and agency (too often presented through the prisms of self-promotion) has further served to delegitimise the views of practitioners as trite anecdotes. Our wish to allow practitioners to debate what constitutes a history of Spanish theatre was, to quote Bratton, ‘a process of identity

formation [...] making the shared culture of the community' (2003, 102, 106). Our decision involved inviting three practitioners, each representing a generation of artists — actors, directors, writers —, to comment 'on how theatre workers construct narratives of their own roles in the shaping of theatre history, chronicling their autonomy, struggles, and experiences within a wider context of public and private memory' (Delgado and Gies 2012, 15). Nuria Espert spoke of 'the tribulations of making work under a dictatorship'; the director Lluís Pasqual commented on the opportunities that emerged during the transition to democracy; the playwright Juan Mayorga articulated a dramatic line that runs from Calderón de la Barca to Rodrigo García (Delgado and Gies 2012, 15). 'For all three a discussion of process served to open up a discussion about methodology and labour, training and craftsmanship' as well as inheritance' (Delgado and Gies 2012, 15). All, stressed the subjective 'I', a recognition of their position within a broader constituency and their engagement with prior performances. Autobiography, as with any form of writing or print is, as Jacky Bratton notes, 'subject to all sorts of interventions and mediations; its witness to its own times and its transmission of the history of the stage must be read as part of the hegemonic process even where autobiography might seem to offer direct revelation of actions and contemporary opinion' (2003, 99). It serves as a constant reminder of the many individual narratives and oral histories that can be drawn on in the construction of any performance history and the partial and interpretative dimensions of any and all authored histories.

### **Nuria Espert**

I have been fortunate enough to see most of Nuria Espert's stage roles over the past thirty years. Many have remained with me: the high theatrics and sexual charge of *Las criadas* which I first

saw in 1984 at Madrid's Sala Olimpia, a tale of two sisters who work as maids to a wealthy woman they resent and the destructive role play that shapes how they deal with the situation; and the raw emotional power of *Yerma* in 1986, a revival of Víctor García's staging to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Lorca's death. With the latter, I recall the diamond-shaped grey canvas membrane set designed by Fabià Puigserver because its conceptual conceit was so distant from mimetic referents; resembling a trampoline, its swelling surface moved with the actors scrambling up its sides to create a stage environment that evoked the crest and valleys of a rural landscape. With its frame hovering over the stalls, the stretchable membrane, somewhat suggestive of a womb, evoked the protagonist's aching childlessness. As with *Las criadas*, the production was a revelation — dispensing with mimetic realism and all the referents I had seen used in previous stagings of Lorca's rural trilogy: women dressed in black, whitewashed houses, fans, mantillas and flamenco.<sup>3</sup> Espert has spoken at length about the genesis of the production, the attribution of authorship to Víctor García for a set realized with the designer Fabià Puigserver and the engineer Miguel Montes that took eight months to develop, and the problems experienced with the censor. I was keen to explore the type of preparatory work that could generate the *danztheater* performance style that marked the actors' movement across the rolling set. My conversations with Espert have allowed for a detailed probing of the crafting of a performance — it is not about replicating questions raised by Marcos Ordóñez (Espert and Ordóñez 2002) and Juan Cruz (2007) in their respective books of interviews with Espert but rather expanding, unpicking a throwaway comment or tackling areas that are conspicuous by their absence: as with the realization of a gestural vocabulary that was 'rooted in the physical language of childlessness: raising her legs up as if to give birth, gently touching the leg of

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<sup>3</sup> The descriptions of both these productions draw on my earlier thick descriptions of the stagings (Delgado 2003, 140–151).

pregnant woman, caressing her breasts as if to stimulate the production of milk' (Brunstein 1973, 34). The physical dexterity of the actors who worked as technicians handling the ropes; the work on balance and fitness required to sustain a two-hour performance on the wobbly set; the attention to sound design, mixing the actors' dialogue with the whirring of the motor lifting up the trampoline-like structure all gave the production a visceral energy. Espert linked the rehearsals on *Yerma* to their earlier collaboration on *Las criadas* in 1969: gestures that do not necessarily complement the word; the knocking against the hard metallic panels that hurled both Espert and Julieta Serrano back into the constrained circular space, the challenges of balance in learning to walk in the high platform shoes across the sharp rake of the stage, the knee pads which were a practical necessity in protecting the actresses' knees as they crawled across the floor like circling wolves. Rehearsals were about setting up a process that could physicalise the play's linguistic encounters — working with the scenographic pivoting panels almost as if they were the equipment in a gym (Espert 2015). Dispensing with the terrain of studied naturalism involved building up physical stamina through corporeal training and exercise. *Yerma* was, according to Espert, the forging of 'un tipo de teatro que nadie había hecho antes' (Cruz 2007, 141). Espert shared the details of a rehearsal process — that which happens behind closed doors — that generated a staging that was to have a profound influence on stage practice in Spain, Europe, and North America.

### **The rehearsal room**

There are times when I see a piece of work and I leave the theatre with a plethora of questions: how was that stage moment created? How brilliant to cast that actor so effectively against type? Why have that performer enter in through downstage left when an entrance downstage right

would have been more powerful? Many of my questions relate to process — the how and the why of a design decision or performance register. The opportunities that I have had to watch directors Calixto Bieito and Lluís Pasqual at work — in the rehearsal room or even beforehand thinking through play choices, working through design possibilities with a scenographer or considering the acoustic of a performance space — have allowed me to think about the process as much as the product. It is not always practical to spend time in rehearsal; it is hard to justify spending six weeks in a rehearsal room to a university manager during term time. Furthermore, the presence of an eyewitness may compromise the rehearsal process if actors feel uncomfortable or insecure. I am usually present for a proportion of that creative process, so my view is partial, and incomplete. If the company draws on performers who have worked together previously there is often a shared culture of understanding where abbreviations come to the fore. I may not be privy to all the shared references. If the production is working with metaphor or metanarratives, I may not be able to properly frame decisions made earlier on in the rehearsal process. But what I am able to do is watch the architectural shape of the production build up, note how the visual language is refined, and observe how a role is constructed.

Watching Mingo Rafols and Roser Cami create Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Bieito's 2001 staging of Shakespeare's Scottish play, I was able to note the different demands made by Castilian, as opposed to Catalan, on enunciation. (The production was staged in both languages.) The movement of the mouth in Castilian was larger, providing broader facial gestures. Roser Cami confessed that there was a greater physical exertion necessitated by the Castilian-language performance, which placed a weightier demand on the voice. Catalan is a more economical language, closer to the English which Bieito sees as 'less guttural than Spanish' (Bieito, Delgado and Parker 2005, 117). So, the production felt less harsh in Catalan. Rafols acknowledged the



difficulties of moving between the two languages: ‘The pace is so hard and fast that there is sometimes a moment when you slip from Spanish to Catalan and you’re not entirely sure it’s happened until after you’ve said it’ (cited in Bieito, Delgado and Parker 2005, 117).

Pasqual’s rehearsals are more discursive, a process of constructing roles slowly. Bieito allows the actors a great degree of freedom and encourages them to try out any idea, however wild or seemingly unrelated to text. For Pasqual, it is about building up layers slowly and methodically, building up a cohesive creative unit through the process of working through a play. ‘If when I read a play I know how to do it, then I would not do it’ (1996, 208), he has stated, and he shares the things he cannot easily comprehend about a play in rehearsal with the cast. Often, he is guided by the musicality of the language, and it is through the aural that he creates the stage world. For his 2014 staging of *El caballero de Olmedo*, flamenco musicians were in the rehearsal process throughout the development of the production and the music was composed in the developmental phase with the performers present. The musicians’ low key improvisational strumming and drumming played a key role in creating a frame for the play where storytelling was prioritized and characterization harnessed in favour of a more lissom performance register. The actors came on as if at a rehearsal, preparing to warm up and chatting informally in groups. The audience was invited to be part of this privileged space, to watch the piece evolve. Pasqual had no set design before rehearsals began: ‘Dos semanas antes de los ensayos hice una noche con Sara Baras en homenaje a Carmen Amaya y puse las sillas de los flamencos tal y como las ponen ellos normalmente. El día que empecé a poner en pie el *Caballero* puse las sillas más o menos en disposición que luego se transformaron en las tres posiciones del flamenco, una para cada acto’ (Pasqual 2015). The chairs were moved by the cast to create the necessary performance spaces. Pasqual wanted to ensure that the sense of play that had prevailed in rehearsals, of actors

standing up to try ideas out, of moving into roles and watching each other perform, was folded into the performances. Rosa Maria Sardà ‘entered’ into the role of the sage procuress Fabia, as a cape was placed onto her shoulders — she was given the prop needed to take on the role and so the performance frame moved into beginning of the play. Sardà’s increased frailty — she was 73 when she took on the role — did not serve as an impediment. Rather Pasqual had Fabia observing proceedings intently from one of the chairs, as if willing the characters into their feats. She signalled to the musicians to accompany her when she stood up to intervene in the onstage action, weaving in and out of the characters to set herself up as a controlling force, orchestrating the onstage action.<sup>4</sup>

Having also worked as an actor early in his career, Pasqual sometimes demonstrates what he would like to see from an actor but makes it clear they should not mimic or imitate him but rather try and listen to the poetry of the language and how he or she might find their own poetic line through it. Once a production opens he does not usually see it but rather stands in the wings, listening to how it adjusts to the audience’s breathing and responses. For Pasqual, I have realized it is always about allowing the verse to breathe so it is alive with the inflections of everyday speech and aligns with the music that he so often uses to underscore the action. There is never a storyboard, and increasingly the set is as bare and economical as possible — in part a response to the cuts that the Lliure has faced in the current culture of austerity — while décor is realized through and across the actors’ bodies and props incorporated as necessary and deployed metaphorically as the poetic and the real come together cheek by jowl.

## **Interviewing Pedro, Interpreting Almodóvar**

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed examination of the performance, see Delgado (2015, 6–8).

Over the past decade, I have been in the fortunate position of having been invited to chair a significant number of public interviews with Pedro Almodóvar. These have offered me a remarkable opportunity to probe his working process, his preparatory rehearsals with actors, and the different elements that he co-ordinates when preparing a film.<sup>5</sup> The first of these, in the summer of 2006, at the BFI's National Film Theatre 1, following a screening of *Volver*, also involved Penélope Cruz. Speaking to them both that evening I realized that for all the homages to Italian neorealism and 1950s American melodramas in the film, *Volver* is essentially about contemporary Spain: about a generation who turned a blind eye to the abuses of the Franco regime; about the corpses of the 100,000 civilians shot by nationalists during the Civil War and its aftermath lying in mass graves across the length and breadth of the country; the revenants who continue to haunt the nation's psyche. In *Volver* Almodóvar offers a space for reconciliation where Carmen Maura's mother and her daughter Raimunda, played by Penélope Cruz, can find forgiveness. *Volver* is structured around family secrets and lies, around dying and death, and the need to come to terms with the mistakes of the past, to atone and make amends in the hope of moving forward. It is perhaps no coincidence that the film reunites Almodóvar with Carmen Maura, an early collaborator with whom he had had a public falling out after *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988). It also takes him back to his native La Mancha, where Raimunda and her sister Sole both find solace and comfort and where Irene returns to nurse their dying neighbour Agustina.

Indeed, I understood two key things about Almodóvar's cinema that night.

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<sup>5</sup> These interviews also necessitate, as with the interviews with theatre practitioners, preparatory research which might involve revisiting films and performances, contextual reading — and there is a broad range of scholarship in Almodóvar studies — and further critical reading depending on the chosen focus of the interview.

First, that it is political with a big P. For all the ways in which he's been classified as a director more concerned with playfulness than politics, Almodóvar's cinema isn't afraid to grapple with the major issues facing Spanish society. At a time when Spain was still enjoying economic growth, the sight of Penélope Cruz's Raimunda cleaning the gleaming reflective floors of Richard Rogers' T-4 extension to Madrid airport spoke of the country's frenzied construction boom while the ghost of Carmen Maura's dead mother embodied an idea of historical memory liberated from the polarised language of Spain's partisan political sphere.

Second, that Almodóvar's work with actors is key to an understanding of his cinema.

Indeed, I would argue that it is impossible to explore screen acting in Almodóvar's work without reference to the stage. Almodóvar worked with the independent theatre company Los Goliardos in Madrid in the early 1980s; it is where he first met Carmen Maura, and where he acquired an understanding of actors and acting that is central to the concepts of theatricality and role play that run through his cinema. 'I think that I wanted to be a director', he told me, 'because I wanted to work with actors — when an actor gets something for the first time, it's like a miracle, and the director is the first witness of that. That is an incredible privilege, and that gives you a kind of pleasure that's addictive' (Almodóvar and Cruz 2006). Almodóvar often spends years working through drafts of screenplays; and when he begins working with actors, he refines the script further. For *Volver*, he talked of rehearsing for three months:

I'm obsessed with the musicality of the dialogues. [...] I've realised that my work with actors is more like that of a theatre director rather than a film director. So we begin by reading around a table, and that's how I establish the tone of the dialogues and what's between the lines. Then these readings become rehearsals, but not on location, and during these readings, I adapt the dialogues to the actors and actresses who are taking on those roles. And I also prepare them physically for the role — I usually have a team of people who work with me on this — but I like to be at the forefront of this, of making them [look like] what the character looks like. This is very important for the actors: to be able to look in the mirror and see that this is the character. (Almodóvar and Cruz 2006)

Almodóvar spoke of the construction of the character of Raimunda with Penélope Cruz — lowering the register of the voice, the make-up inspired by Claudia Cardinale's dark eyeliner, the 'ample cleavage enhanced by strategically placed medallions', the artificial bottom constructed to give Raimunda a different balance: 'Penélope had trained in dance, and so tends to walk upright, very much in the air. But for the character, we wanted someone very grounded, somebody weighed down by life' (Almodóvar and Cruz 2006). I understood that the preparations are a methodology that his actors employ even when not working with him. 'He's always really present in everything I do', Cruz admitted; 'his is a completely different way of working. And the character lives on inside you after those three months of rehearsal' (Almodóvar and Cruz 2006).

I have always thought that Federico García Lorca created great roles for female actors because the outstanding performers of his time were women: Margarita Xirgu, Lola Membrives, Josefina Díaz de Artigas, Irene López Heredia. Did Almodóvar write such outstanding roles for

women for the same reason: ‘Yes’, he confessed, you can find good actresses of every age in Spain, but not actors’ (Almodóvar and Cruz 2006). *Volver* even features a homage to Lorca’s *La casa de Bernarda Alba* in the funeral wake for Paula. In the Green Room after the interview, Almodóvar mentioned how important theatre-going is in introducing him to new actors. It explains both the prominence of stage actors like Lluís Homar, Eduard Fernández, José Luis Gómez, and Blanca Portillo in his films and a mode of working that draws on the practices of the theatrical rehearsal room. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that when David Gies and I interviewed Lluís Pasqual for our edited *History of the Theatre in Spain*, Pasqual, who appears with Marisa Paredes at the end of *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) has spoken of Almodóvar as having had ‘a huge impact on Spanish audiences in terms of dealing with matters that seemed to be taboo, were viewed as indecent, or appeared to be subjects for a literary minority rather than for broader theatre or film audiences’ (2012, 467).

I have had the chance to conduct nine additional stage interviews with Pedro Almodóvar since 2006 for all the subsequent UK premieres of his films, the opening of the musical of *Women on the Verge* in the West End in 2015, and the 2016 BFI season of his work, as well as a number of one-to-one conversations. It has given me a chance to further probe his casting process and the specifics of his direction of actors as well as investigate the ways in which his films engage both with theatrical motifs and with the political debates of twenty-first century Spain. It has also allowed me to generate primary materials which have been drawn on by others (see Wheeler 2014).

My findings during these interviews have been many, and key in my understanding of his work.

In both the conversations I had with him on *Los abrazos rotos* (2009) — one public (sponsored by *The Independent* newspaper) and one private (leading to a publication in *Sight & Sound*) — Almodóvar spoke to me of the film as an engagement with duplication and the double. This is evident both in the film-within-a-film structure, the ominous making-of that pursues the characters, the fictional conceits of classic *noir*, the references to a number of his favourite films and actresses (from *Voyage to Italy* [1954] to *Leave Her to Heaven* [1945], Jeanne Moreau to Audrey Hepburn), and the repeated return to the textures, materials and mechanics of film and the craftsmanship of filmmaking. As much as a ‘love letter to cinema’ (Almodóvar’s own description of *Los abrazos rotos*), Almodóvar also articulated a vision of *Los abrazos rotos* as a profoundly political film: a tale of the body in decay; of alternative families tested through adverse times; of structures of parenting and parenthood at both domestic and institutional level; of the relationship between individual and institutional discourses of trauma and mourning with the narrative’s tale of the burial of difficult memories functioning as a metaphor for Spain’s transition to democracy: ‘We were all really pleased’, Almodóvar stated, ‘to move from a dictatorship to a democracy without the spilling of blood. [...] During the transition it was very important to just look ahead, to create a new constitution looking to the future. But the issue hasn’t gone away. It’s now a humanitarian issue; of allowing families to unearth their dead [...] the momentum is here and families are going to continue to look for their dead’ (Delgado 2009, 44).

Lluís Homar, Almodóvar revealed, had needed five months of preparations to play the blind Harry Caine. Almodóvar insisted the actor make his way to rehearsals at the offices of *El Deseo* as if he were blind, as part of his groundwork in creating the role. Almodóvar explained the differences in working with stage actors like Blanca Portillo and José Luis Gómez — the

need to often lower the register with stage actors to the point where they appear to be ‘not’ acting, the insistence on styling each character very early on to assist with the construction of the role (Delgado 2009, 41). Almodóvar also confessed to being a bigamist in his need to tell multiple stories at once: ‘In any good tale, the narrator has to open and close doors. Not all doors have to be closed however, it’s important to leave some open for the spectator to close’ (Delgado 2009, 42–43). Listening to Almodóvar talk nostalgically about the move to digital cameras and online editing, made me realize that *Los abrazos rotos* celebrates power of storytelling in cinema, with the elements involved in making a film — actors, the moviola, the camera, the sound boom, the lights — very much on display through the action of the narrative. At the end of the film, the family is brought together through film which operates as a binding mechanism, a way of forging community. The film’s final images show the filmmaker Harry Caine, his production manager Judit and their son Diego sharing intimacies and pleasures through film: film is the means through which they are able to recognize and deal with their harrowing past.

The role of art at a time of recession was the key area that I explored with him in the interview I conducted for *Sight & Sound* in May 2011. At a time when Spain’s Ministry of Culture saw its cultural budget cut by a third, *La piel que habito* (2011) was advocating for the role of art as a major contributor to civic life. Vera, the patient imprisoned by Antonio Banderas’s suave plastic surgeon, survives her incarceration by keeping herself occupied through creative endeavours. The film references the work of the American artist Louise Bourgeois through Vera’s art works, her stitched body stocking and the images of a woman imprisoned in her home that embody Vera’s predicament. ‘Art allows Vera to survive’, Almodóvar observed; ‘it gives her an instrument of hope. Coupled with her meditation and yoga, the fact that she copies the work of Louise Bourgeois from the only information she has at her disposal offers her



a form of companionship. It's not about Elena's character being a great artist — she's not trying to be original — it's simply a balm that allows her to carry on' (cited in Delgado 2011, 22).

The presence of Antonio Banderas in the role of the crazed surgeon Ledgard also allowed for an exploration of processes of ageing: Almodóvar's early films preserve the boyish Banderas that Hollywood fell in love with; Ledgard uses plastic surgery to promote an ideal of beautiful youth coveted by contemporary society. Almodóvar spoke of directing Antonio Banderas after a twenty-year gap, the 'blank facade', the 'aseptic and detached' appearance (cited in Delgado 2011, 22). The 'inscrutable look' and 'emptiness' was cultivated by Almodóvar as an 'expressive' characteristic 'because it signals a lack of feeling and this is a trait that defines the psychopath [...] I wanted him to look like a gentleman: suave and elegant on the outside. It's more interesting when you have that kind of demeanour' (cited in Delgado 2011, 20).

Motifs of acting and directing previous collaborators also surfaced in the discussion of Marisa Paredes in the role of the loyal housekeeper Marilia. He described her role as 'like 'Ma' Barker, one of those matriarchs who head crime families'. He drew on what he termed 'Marisa's tragic vein. Marilia is the character who is most conscious of the air of fatality that hangs over her family and it's a fate that she battles with. She's a savage mother who has given birth to two mad and anomalous beings and she acknowledges — in the Lorca-like monologue delivered to Elena [Amaya]'s character [Vera] — that she also carries the madness within her' (cited in Delgado 2011, 20).

Storytelling has been arguably the key trait of Almodóvar's filmmaking since its earliest days. The retelling of cinematic tales was highlighted by his brother and producer Agustín at a 2013 event organized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences through the potboilers that Pedro spun to his sisters: 'my sisters loved to hear Pedro's versions of the films

that we had just seen. Pedro embellished and improved the plots; he re-interpreted and illustrated the stories making them seem even better than the originals' (Almodóvar 2013). This process of cinematic reworking is envisaged as a narrative strategy in pretty much all of his films. A primary narrative intersects with complex subplots, plot deviations, films, theatrical or dance performances within the film. References to other films are layered elegantly across each and every one of his works, revealing much about his cinematic formation and tastes. In 2013, when delivering the British Academy of Film and Television David Lean Lecture, he spoke about what he termed 'the cinema inside me': films that have made their way into his own works shaping their structure, characters and narratives. The genesis of the short film *El amante menguante* in *Hable con ella* (2002) was traced to Jack Arnold's film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957); Gena Reynolds' diva in John Cassavetes' *Opening Night* (1977) linked to Marisa Paredes's Huma Royo in *Todo sobre mi madre*; Anne Baxter's rabbit like Eve Harrington in Joseph Mankiewicz's 1950 film *All About Eve* contrasted to Cecilia Roth's Manuela in *Todo sobre mi madre*. Motherhood as a central trope in his work was viewed through the courtroom scene confrontation between Marisa Paredes's Becky del Páramo and Victoria Abril's Rebecca in *Tacones lejanos* (1991), a sequence that allows what Almodóvar terms 'auteurs as different as Douglas Sirk and Ingmar Bergman to join hands' across the screen (Almodóvar 2012).

The lecture, which was recorded and is now available on the BAFTA website,<sup>6</sup> allowed for an imaginative creative consideration of how cinema functions in his work. It is not about an act of homage, which he classifies as something passive, but rather about cinema inside cinema functioning 'like another organ' (Almodóvar 2012). While so many of the publications on Almodóvar's work revolve around an examination of his finished films — the products so to

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://guru.bafta.org/pedro-almodovar-david-lean-lecture>. All subsequent references in this paragraph refer to this interview.

speak — the lecture was revelatory in allowing Almodóvar to discuss his craftsmanship: thinking through the films that have shaped his cinematic vision and aesthetic.

In a complementary interview filmed the day before the public lecture, Almodóvar further elaborated on his working practices, revealing how he develops a script over multiple drafts and does not visualise actors until the script is fairly well developed.<sup>7</sup> Exceptions are *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* which he did write for Maura and *¡Átame!* (1989) which was conceived with Banderas in mind. He spoke of how he uses all the elements available to him to narrate his films; what happens when you cast the wrong actor in a role; how he plays all the roles for the actors so they understand the rhythm and pulse of a character as he has conceived it, and then how he has the actors read the screenplay and corrects them as they go along until, in his words ‘el actor se instala en el personaje; da la impresión que solo ese actor puede hacer ese papel porque está hecho como un traje exclusivamente para él’. He pays particular attention to the musicality of language, the desire ‘de articular las palabras; y en eso les dirijo casi como si fueran cantantes. Y muchas veces cuando escojo la toma adecuada [...] no necesito ni ver el combo, con oírlo me basta’.

January 2015. *Women on the Verge* opened at London’s Playhouse Theatre — the second outing for this David Yazbek and Jeffrey Lane musical, adapted from Almodóvar’s film (and revised significantly since its New York opening in 2010), and directed by the New York based director Bartlett Sher. Almodóvar was not involved in the adaptation but has offered advice on request, attending workshops and preview performances along each stage of the process. The two public interviews I conducted with him at the Playhouse Theatre and the BFI<sup>8</sup> gravitated

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://guru.bafta.org/pedro-almodovar-casting-eavesdropping-and-penelope-cruz>. All subsequent Almodóvar references in this paragraph refer to this interview.

<sup>7</sup> <http://guru.bafta.org/pedro-almodovar-casting-eavesdropping-and-penelope-cruz>

<sup>8</sup> The latter is available on the BFI player, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/54b7a81a579a7>

around the theatrical adaptations of his work, his creation of characters (including the character of Pepa's apartment), the role of women in the film, and an unpicking of the construction of *Mujeres al borde* — talking the audience through specific moments in the film in the manner of a 'making of'. The revelations he made — about recurring dreams from childhood of living in a furniture shop, about the design of the iconic swinging coffee pot earrings worn by María Barranco's Candela in *Mujeres*, who he identified as a nod to the Marilyn Monroe character in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) — offered insights into how artisan Almodóvar plots the look and design of his films with a meticulous attention to detail.

I have written elsewhere of the shift of direction that his 2013 farce *Los amantes pasajeros* entailed (Delgado 2016a). The UK release of his twentieth feature, *Julieta* (2016), served as the springboard for a season of Almodóvar's work presented by the BFI. Working on the curation of the season with the BFI, we looked back on his body of films, organizing study events on the role of women and memory in his films, bringing together artists and filmmakers to discuss his vocabulary and his impact. What is his legacy? Why does he matter? We brought the actresses Marisa Paredes and Rossy de Palma to discuss how he rehearses and works, the nuts and bolts of his construction process. His regular collaborator, composer Alberto Iglesias, discussed the ways in which a score for the films is planned and then put together. In addition, Almodóvar curated 12 Spanish films that he admires, both a way of repositioning his work within wider histories of Spanish cinema — so often the reference points used by academics are largely those of the classical Hollywood cinema — and of showcasing work that in some cases had not previously been seen in the UK. Ways of thinking about how we remember; about why certain artistic works are forgotten and what recovery might mean. A masterclass which I conducted, recorded and publicly available, allowed us to target areas that critics had not

habitually chosen to focus on; a process of again inscribing the importance of process to his work.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It is precisely this ability to open up other perspectives, to offer different ways of seeing to highlight process and craftsmanship, to dismantle and dissect some of the modes of constructing a piece of creative practice, of unpicking the contributions of those who form part of the directorial brand, of probing what is legible to different audiences, that I have found such a productive methodology: what choices are discarded and why? What is the role of the unintended or the accidental? How does the director draw the contributions of a diverse range of artists together and shape them into what she or he hopes will be a coherent and lucid piece of work? Interviews are sometimes part of a wider participant-observation approach — notes on what is said and done in rehearsal, a study of scripts, photographs, models and design drawings, filmed rehearsal material, budgets and past productions —, sometimes they are the one of the few windows into that process. I ask questions of these interviews, and I try and ensure that I put them out into the public domain — in published or video form — as a way of allowing others access to them so that they, in turn, can ask their own questions. These interviews are a process of investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. Indeed, work through and with the creative arts can generate research findings that expand our understandings of areas, movements, and/or stories that remind us of what it means to be human. Over the past twenty years, I have conducted over 250 public interviews with organizations including the

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUdmBSKMbdY>. For an interview *on Julieta*, see Delgado 2016b.

London Film Festival, the Edinburgh International Festival, the Imperial War Museum, Curzon Cinemas, and the Barbican Centre, and the over 50 one-to-one conversations relating to stage practice and filmmaking. These are both an archive where I select and shape particular types of evidence and a repertoire of knowledge,<sup>10</sup> as Derrida observes, they are not simply about ‘dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal’, but ‘a question of the future’ (1995, 36). And each and every one of them takes me back to the excitement I experienced on that November evening in 1983, when I first saw Pasqual’s production of *La vida del rey Eduardo II de Inglaterra*, and nothing was ever quite the same again.

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### **Notes on contributor**

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<sup>10</sup> Diana Taylor refers to the repertoire as a ‘non-archival system of transfer’ (2003, xvii).

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